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## Viewing cable 09SANJOSE225, COSTA RICA: FULL DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH CUBA

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### Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

### Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#09SANJOSE225**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
<a href="#">09SANJOSE225</a>	<a href="#">2009-03-25 16:58</a>	<a href="#">2011-08-30 01:44</a>	<a href="#">CONFIDENTIAL</a>	<a href="#">Embassy San Jose</a>

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-11/Investigacion/NotasDestacadas/Investigacion2710281.aspx>

<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-11/Investigacion/NotaPrincipal/Investigacion2710282.aspx>

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FM AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0634  
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0057  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0825  
RHMFISS/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN JOSE 000225

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR WHA/CEN, WHA/PPC, WHA/CCA AND PRM

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/18/2019

TAGS: [CS](#) [CU](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#)

SUBJECT: COSTA RICA: FULL DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH CUBA

REF: A. SAN JOSE 018 (ALL NOTAL)

1B. 08 SAN JOSE 629  
1C. 08 SAN JOSE 129  
1D. 07 SAN JOSE 1106  
1E. 06 SAN JOSE 1841  
1F. SAN SALVADOR 229

Classified By: DCM Peter M. Brennan for reason 1.4 (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. On March 18, Costa Rica re-established full diplomatic relations with Cuba, ending 48 years of limited contact. In an open letter to the Costa Rican people and in his press conference announcing the change, President Oscar Arias said "the time had come" for "direct and open dialogue" with the island, adding that the decades of official silence between the two countries had yielded benefits to neither. The GOCR's move was characteristically sudden, but not unexpected; the Arias administration had been mulling this over for some months. FM Stagno informed the Ambassador "as a courtesy" two days in advance, making clear that Arias was inclined to upgrade relations as soon as possible after the FMLN election win in El Salvador, and before VP Biden's upcoming visit to Costa Rica. Although maintaining a healthy degree of skepticism, Stagno believes that the GOCR (and other regional governments) will be able to work with the new Cuban foreign affairs team (Rodriguez and Malmierca). Local media coverage was swift, in some cases critical of the change in Arias' attitude, but brief. If Arias was hoping for a significant positive media bounce, he did not get it. With this announcement, Arias has completed his pledges to open or improve relations with the Arab world, China and Cuba during his administration. END SUMMARY.

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PRESIDENT ARIAS: "OPEN PATHS AND BUILD BRIDGES"  
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12. (U) After nearly 48 years of limited and strained relations, on March 18, Costa Rica re-established full diplomatic relations with Cuba. In a letter to the Costa Rican people, President Arias said that Costa Rica should be recognized by the international community for "its friendship and not for its enmity," and for "its disposition to help and not for its intransigence." He also said that today's reality in international relations was far different than that of 1961 and that Costa Rica should adjust its policy accordingly.

13. (U) With this preamble, President Arias signed an Executive Order on national television, re-establishing full diplomatic ties (which had been at the consular level since 1961). Arias said that the time had arrived for "direct and open dialogue" between the two countries, whether on topics of common agreement or disagreement. Bringing up Costa Rica's establishment of relations with regimes far different from Costa Rica's "way of governance," such as the People's Republic of China (Ref D), Arias asked in his statement, "How could we not open relations with a country that is geographically and culturally far closer to Costa Rica?" Without giving a specific date, Arias said that "in the next few weeks" the two countries would be exchanging ambassadors.

14. (U) Arias repeated his arguments in an op-ed on March 23, adding that "Costa Rica can not be the only country in Latin America that still . . . contemplates the shadow of the Berlin Wall. Our foreign policy must be coherent and in tune with the times." He added that re-establishing full relations with Cuba gave more authority to his long-held views that the USG should lift the embargo and close Guantanamo completely. There was no explicit criticism of Cuba's record on human rights or democracy in any of Arias' written or verbal comments.

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SUDDEN, BUT NOT TOTALLY UNEXPECTED  
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15. (C) Over the last nine months, Arias' desire to upgrade

relations became increasingly clear behind the scenes (Refs. A-B). He told then-HHS Secretary Leavitt in January that "dialogue was important" among opponents in Central America during the 1980s conflicts and that talking to the opposition was key, hinting broadly that he now favored this approach with Cuba. Arias added that Costa Rica would have to "think carefully" about its relationship with Cuba (i.e., upgrade relations) if the FMLN won the March elections in El Salvador (which they have, Ref F). Expecting the FMLN government to upgrade ties to Cuba, Arias did not want Costa Rica to be the only country in Central America without full diplomatic relations with the island. He added that Cuba might follow China's path leading to openness in the economy in the short term and political reforms later.

¶16. (C) FM Bruno Stagno echoed and amplified these arguments with the Ambassador and DCM on March 16, making it clear then that an announcement on re-establishing relations was imminent. Stagno acknowledged that full relations might not lead to a productive dialogue with Cuba, but at least there would be official channels for dialogue. He noted that Costa Rica was already behind; "all" the other Latin American leaders had visited Cuba and in some cases had signed "very important" agreements. Costa Rica did not want to continue to be left out. The FM could see some benefits to being the last principled opposition in the region without full relations with Cuba, but on balance, he saw more negatives if Costa Rica did not upgrade relations. Given some "interesting" signs that U.S. policy was softening toward Cuba, and that Stagno thought favorably of new Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez and new Foreign Trade Minister Rodrigo Malmierca from their service together at the UN, he judged the time ripe for the change in GOCR policy. Stagno concluded that the government would consider delaying the announcement until after VP Biden's visit, if that was the USG preference.

¶17. (C) When the Department signaled that the USG preferred a later announcement, but urged the GOCR to act as far in advance of the Biden visit if Arias wanted to move sooner, the President went ahead with his plans to announce the Cuba news after the weekly cabinet meeting on March 18. His announcement followed the pattern established with the Arias Administration's sudden move of its embassy in Israel from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv in 2006, its recognition of China in 2007, and its recognition of "Palestine" in 2008 (Refs C-E).

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MEDIA CRITICAL; STORY DOES NOT LAST  
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¶18. (U) Although local media initially gave the Cuba news prominent coverage on March 18, the story had been pushed off the front pages by the next day. Leading daily La Nacion's coverage highlighted the contradiction between Arias' harsh 2006 criticism of the Castro regime, which compared it to Pinochet's "bloody" regime, to his mild comments as he upgraded relations. During the press conference, an obviously uncomfortable Arias stuck to the line that "the time had come for official and normal relations with Cuba," without responding directly to reporters' pointed questions about what Costa Rica would do now to influence Cuba's human rights record.

¶19. (U) By March 23, the media coverage was less critical. Leading political analyst (and adviser to PLN presidential candidate Laura Chinchilla) Nuria Marin wrote in an op-ed that full diplomatic relations were a "necessary step" in accord with "new geopolitical realities," that she hoped would help open Cuba to the world. She applauded the Arias administration's "pragmatic vision," which had also prompted the Costa Rican opening with China, and stressed that the opening with Cuba did not undermine Costa Rica's commitment to liberty and democracy on the island.

¶10. (U) Most media also reported our statement, which acknowledged Costa Rica's sovereign decision to upgrade relations, but expressed our hope that Costa Rica would

advocate for freedom, human rights, democracy, and the well being of Cuba's citizens. Some media noted that the USG did not object, and that the news had not taken the USG by surprise.

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POLITICAL REACTION  
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¶11. (U) Reaction from the heads of factions in the National Assembly were (predictably) mixed. Jose Merino, chief of Frente Amplio (socialist party), said that the time had arrived and that the Cold War was long over. Francisco Molina of the Citizens Action Party (PAC) said that relations with Cuba should have been opened up at the same time as China (in 2007). The head of the National Liberation Party (PLN) Oscar Nunez, the President's party, said that Costa Rica had a great responsibility to the world to export its model of liberties and to not be afraid to do it. On the other hand, the Libertarian Movement chief Luis Barrantes questioned the "chameleon-like change" of Arias' position.

¶12. (U) Not unexpectedly, the Cuban Consul in San Jose, Antonio Pardo, welcomed the decision, indicating that the Castro regime seemed to have no (current) lingering resentment towards the Arias Administration from the president's 2006 remarks.

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POSSIBLE IMMIGRATION IMPACT  
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¶13. (SBU) Immigration Director Mario Zamora was one interlocutor who had warned us that a change was coming in Costa Rican-Cuban relations. He did not view reestablished relations as positive news, however, and predicted that more Cubans would now try to get visas to visit Costa Rica. From an immigration point of view, he noted that:

- In 2006, over 12,000 Cubans received visas;
- in 2007 and 2008 respectively, this number dropped to 4,900 and 4,500;
- the higher number in 2006 was due to a political climate accepting more Cuban immigration, but changes to immigration laws since 2006 tightened up "family reunification" requirements resulting in the lower numbers in 2007 and 2008;
- Cubans are targets of what Costa Rican immigration believes to be a well-organized human trafficking network; and
- Zamora believed a "significant" number of Cubans who come to Costa Rica intend to move on to the U.S. and that his office viewed these immigrants more as "economic" rather than "political."

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COMMENT  
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¶14. (C) Costa Rica's upgrade in relations has more to do with the Arias administration (and indirectly, with its view of the U.S. administration) than it does about Cuba. The GOCR did not want to be the "last man standing" in the region without full diplomatic relations with the island, and President-elect Funes' announcement of a future upgrade in Salvadoran relations with Cuba stole a little of Arias' thunder. Although he had been contemplating re-establishing relations as another "dramatic" foreign policy gesture, Arias was clearly more comfortable acting after the new U.S. administration took office, hopeful of continued softening in USG policy toward Cuba. Now that Arias has opened the door to "dialogue" with Cuba, we should press him to work with other Latin American leaders to develop a more vigorous and constructive regional role in encouraging Cuba to embrace democratic rule and human rights.

CIANCHETTE